



## Intermediate English Audio

### Episode 18: Grand Central Terminal in New York City

[00:00:00]

Welcome to *English, please*, the podcast where we explore captivating topics and under 10 minutes and clear intermediate English. I'm your host, Christopher. I live and work in New York City, and I'm a language enthusiast who has always been interested in the best ways to learn a new language. Thank you for joining me for another episode, designed to help you improve your English listening skills and vocabulary. I hope you've been able to use some of the tips I shared during the most recent episodes as you continue to develop your English skills.

It's been another busy week, and I've just returned from a short trip to Washington, D.C. While the us doesn't have a network of trains for easy travel around the country (Europe and Asia have far better train [00:01:00] availability) the East coast is pretty good. For example, you can travel to Boston or Washington, D.C. easily from New York, and there were frequent trains. That got me thinking about Grand Central Terminal here in New York. We have two major train hubs here, Grand Central and Penn Station. Penn Station has had a difficult history, full of change (I'll talk about that in another episode), but Grand Central has remained mostly as it was for over a century.

Located in the heart of busy Midtown Manhattan is Grand Central Terminal, a masterpiece of architecture, a transportation hub, and a beloved landmark that is full of energy. Today, we'll take a short journey to Grand Central for the history, the hidden gems, and the enduring charm of this iconic place.

The story of Grand Central begins in the middle of the [00:02:00] 19th century, which was a period of rapid growth in New York City. Horse-drawn carriages and steam trains filled the streets, and this created a serious need for a centralized railway station. The first Grand Central Depot, a simple structure, opened in 1871.

In addition to being too small for the future growth of New York City, there were also safety concerns related to the venting of steam. There was also a desire for a grander entrance to the city, and in 1903, this building was destroyed.

The vision for the new Grand Central Terminal was nothing less than extraordinary. The architects, Reed and Stern, wanted to build a Beaux-Arts style masterpiece, incorporating elements of Roman and classical Greek architecture. [00:03:00] Construction began in 1903 and was an enormous undertaking. In fact, it took 10 long



## Intermediate English Audio

years, 10,000 workers, and an estimated \$43 million to complete Grand Central. This is equivalent to over \$1 billion today. Grand Central Terminal officially opened its doors in 1913.

When you step inside Grand Central, it's immediately an experience that overwhelms your senses. The soaring main concourse is bathed in natural light that enters through a magnificent 13,000 square foot ceiling. And it's a breathtaking site.

The ceiling. Wow!

The ceiling of Grand Central Terminal is a masterpiece by itself. It depicts the constellations painted on a bright [00:04:00] blue background. When you're in this part of the building, it's a constant reminder of the vastness above the massive crowds.

Beneath this ceiling and under your feet is another marvel of engineering. To accommodate the 67 train tracks. The ingenious design features two levels: a main Concourse, and a lower level with platforms. This clever solution, nicknamed the "Park Avenue Tunnel," made it possible to have more tracks without sacrificing the beauty of the main hall.

Okay I have to pause here to talk a little more about the ceiling. This awe-inspiring creation features a curved design that creates a sense of extreme height and grandeur. But it's the artwork that truly steals the show. The ceiling shows a celestial scene, a vibrant blue background with over [00:05:00] 2,500 hand-painted gilded stars representing various constellations. When you look more closely, however, you might notice something. With one exception, which I'll talk about in a moment, the entire celestial map of the sky is reversed.

Yes, everything you see is correct, but it's backwards. Sure, this might be quite frustrating to astronomy experts, but the mistake only adds to the mystique of the ceiling.

There are a few different theories explaining this *faux pas*.

One theory suggests the design was based on medieval maps that showed the sky from the point-of-view of God, looking down on the Earth from the other side of the stars. This theory explains the [00:06:00] reversed constellations, but there's that exception I mentioned. One constellation, Orion, the Hunter, is not reversed. Strange right.



## Intermediate English Audio

Another theory suggests the reversed sky happened for a simple reason. The artists may have worked from a correct map of the stars that was projected onto the ceiling from below, and therefore was flipped backwards. This theory explains how they made such accurate artwork, but it still doesn't explain why one of the constellations is correct.

Regardless of the reason though, the reversed orientation does not take anything away from the beauty of the artwork. In fact, many New Yorkers. Like the fact that it's backwards because they see it as a unique feature that sets Grand Central's ceiling apart. [00:07:00] When you look up, you'll find familiar constellations like Ursa Major, the Great Bear, containing the Big Dipper and Cassiopeia, the Celestial Queen. One difference is that unlike the real night sky, the stars here, twinkle, or blink. Tiny holes were created in the canvas and behind the holes are special lights that softly illuminate the stars, creating this magical illusion.

Interestingly, the celestial scene we see today, isn't actually the original design. The first version was completed in 1913, and it featured a more realistic night sky with a dark blue background that faded to black at the edges. Unfortunately, this original artwork was damaged by water and smoke from steam trains. By the 1930s, a [00:08:00] brand new design was necessary.

Now, the current celestial map that we see today was designed by a French artist named Paul Helleu. It was installed in 1944 and it features a brighter color and a more stylized depiction of the constellations. However, one section of the original ceiling, a 25 square foot box near the east balcony remains unchanged. This original section serves as a fascinating reminder of the terminal's history and the evolution of its iconic ceiling.

Throughout its history, Grand Central has faced many challenges, from bomb scares to track damage. In the 1960s, Grand Central was going to be demolished, but, thankfully, it was saved by the newly established landmarks Preservation Commission. This organization has saved many historic and important [00:09:00] buildings in New York City over the past several decades.

Today, Grand Central thrives as a busy transportation hub, serving millions of commuters daily. It's a place where locals and tourists alike come together to experience a piece of New York's vibrant energy. There are restaurants, shops, and a food market, so people often pass through, even if they aren't taking a train or subway.



## Intermediate English Audio

I hope you were able to understand most of the content in this episode. And don't forget, as always, there's a transcript available to help you with your understanding. You can find the link in the episode notes. I recommend listening again with the transcript to help with anything that wasn't clear. Again, I'm Christopher, and I want to invite you to join me in future episodes of English, please to hear about a variety of topics, all focused on helping you with your English. Subscribe now, wherever you [00:10:00] listen to podcasts, and let's embark on an adventure together in clear, understandable English. I also encourage you to visit [comullen.com/pod](https://comullen.com/pod) for more information.

Thanks for listening. See you soon!